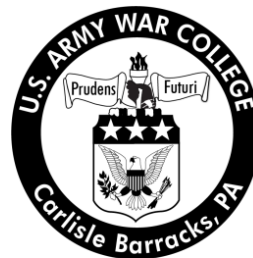


Civilian Research Project USAWC Fellow

MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM: A COUNTERTERRORISM CYCLE FOR THE NEXT DECADE

by

Colonel Jon Braga and Colonel Michelle Schmidt
United States Army



United States Army War College
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Abstract

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Major combat operations will end in Afghanistan, but al Qaeda and other terrorist groups will still pose a threat to the United States beyond 2014. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States government evolved to ensure success against the terrorist threat. Despite these transformations, the evolution of U.S. counterterrorism efforts is not complete. Interviews by the authors with twenty senior counterterrorism officials revealed that U.S. counterterrorism strategy lacks an effective implementation of five essential elements. The authors propose a CT Cycle consisting of the optimization of these five elements and demonstrate that this cycle was present in Iraq from 2005-2009. Although not all operational lessons learned are applicable, the authors call on policymakers to optimize U.S. counterterrorism efforts by adapting all five elements of this cycle at the strategic level in Washington D.C. and in operating environments beyond combat zones: 1) understand the environment; 2) invest despite the risk; 3) maintain a strategy of sustained pressure; 4) decentralize decision-making processes; and 5) reinforce a network of relationships.

MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM: A COUNTERTERRORISM CYCLE FOR THE NEXT DECADE

Major combat operations will soon end in Afghanistan, but al Qaeda and other terrorist groups will pose a threat to the United States beyond 2014. Despite many setbacks including the loss of Usama bin Laden (UBL), al Qaeda and its adherents and affiliates (AQAA) are committed to attacking the United States and the West and will remain a threat as long as their extremist ideology exists. The U.S. Counterterrorism (CT) Community's¹ responsibility is to continue to successfully counter these threats despite the numerous challenges emerging in today's operationally and politically challenging environment. The closures of the combat zones will create their own particular challenges. Add to that a nation fatigued by war, burdened with economic problems, and concerned with a rising China as well as cyber-threats, and it is not difficult to understand the declining priority of counterterrorism. Still, the CT Community (CTC) must be prepared to overcome these challenges, take advantage of the opportunities that do exist, and continue to counter the terrorist threat.

For the purposes of this paper, the "CT Community" is defined as those organizations typically involved in CT activities. These include, but are not limited to, the National Counterterrorism Center, Central Intelligence Agency, Department of Defense (including the Special Operations Command, Defense Intelligence Agency, Joint Special Operations Command, and others), Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Treasury, and other organizations as necessary.

In an effort to identify the critical elements of an effective counterterrorism strategy, the authors interviewed forty-one senior officials and practitioners from across

the CTC representing twenty different organizations within the Department of State, Department of Defense, Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Security Staff, and National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC).² The interviews revealed that the U.S. counterterrorism strategy lacks an effective implementation of five key elements: investments, understanding, strategy, decision-making process, and relationships. The authors propose a CT Cycle consisting of the optimization of these 5 elements and demonstrate that this cycle was effectively implemented in Iraq from 2005-2009.

As al Qaeda's influence began to rapidly grow in Iraq, senior counterterrorism leaders recognized the importance of a shared understanding of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the environment that allowed such a group to prosper. To gain this understanding, the CTC created a new and powerful network of relationships built upon a culture of shared purpose and personal trust. The U.S. Government (USG) invested in collection assets, education, and relationships. Nearly all of these resources were financially costly and the prioritization toward Iraq incurred a level of political risk. However, these investments successfully enabled the required understanding necessary to inform an appropriate strategy. This strategy of sustained pressure focused on pursuing the destruction of AQ's operational capabilities and ideological base. A de-centralized decision-making process enabled the effective execution of this strategy.

As the U.S. Government looks beyond the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan toward a future counterterrorism strategy, the CTC will again have to evolve to ensure continued success. Though never an easy task, counterterrorism will be more difficult in the post-2014 operational environment without the forcing functions of the theaters of

war, as well as a relative decline in priority against numerous competing requirements. Although not all operational lessons learned are applicable, the authors call on policymakers to optimize U.S. counterterrorism efforts by adapting all five elements of this cycle at the strategic level. Adaptation of the CT Cycle within interagency operations in Washington D.C. and in operational environments beyond combat zones will increase effectiveness of U.S. counterterrorism operations.

The authors offer specific recommendations to policymakers to enhance U.S. counterterrorism strategy and protect the homeland and U.S. interests from terrorist threats:

- 1) understand the environment
- 2) invest despite the risk
- 3) maintain a strategy of sustained pressure
- 4) decentralize decision-making processes
- 5) reinforce a network of relationships

A Continuing Threat

As stated in the June 2011 *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, the United States remains at war with al Qaeda.³ AQ declared war against the United States in an August 1996 fatwa published by Usama bin Laden (UBL) and Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁴ Seventeen years later, with the combination of the death of Usama bin Laden and the continued systematic removal of other senior leaders, AQ is struggling but it is not defeated. Core leaders, affiliates and adherents likely see the group's current setbacks as temporary and perhaps even inconsequential in the multi-generational conflict in which they engage. Despite its recent setbacks, AQ evolved into an organization that is

more complex, diverse, and tougher to combat than it was in 9/11. Regardless of its current level of importance in the United States, AQ and its affiliates are continuing their avowed war against America and the West. As long as the ideology remains attractive then AQ, in one form or another, will be a threat to American interests at home and abroad.

Interview Revelations - The CT Cycle Explained

During the research for this study, the authors interviewed forty-one leaders and practitioners from across the U.S. CTC to obtain a holistic, interagency perspective on what is required for an effective counterterrorism strategy. The forty-one interviewees represented departments and agencies across the USG including the National Security Staff, Department of State, Department of Defense, Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the National Counterterrorism Center. State officials included a former ambassador as well as the department's counterterrorism section. Defense officials included those from the Pentagon, Special Operations Command, Defense Intelligence Agency, and Joint Special Operations Command. Of these forty-one interviewees, twenty were senior counterterrorism officials with over two decades of personal experience within their organizations and in some cases specifically within the counterterrorism field. Over half of the remaining interviewees were practitioners with multiple deployments and first hand operational counterterrorism experience.

Despite the disparity in organizations, personalities, and seniority, the interviewees shared common concerns and collectively revealed that U.S. counterterrorism strategy lacks an effective implementation of five essential elements:

- 1) understanding
- 2) investments
- 3) strategy
- 4) decision-making process
- 5) relationships

Interviewees from across DoD, DoS, and CIA, were particularly concerned with a deficient understanding of the threat environment and often a lack of consensus on the definition of the problem. Limited understanding of the threat and the problem itself led to a less than optimal implementation of the other four elements. One senior CIA official, with years of experience in CT, attributed the lack of an effective CT strategy to a lack of depth of understanding. He explained, “there is a need to understand the environment...we can’t go from zero knowledge to hero knowledge quickly, particularly at the policy level.”⁵ He and other interviewees expressed frustration over the inability to look beyond the boundaries of a problem and understand the regional implications.”⁶ Because of the reality of limited capacity, policymakers become overwhelmed with information and they must make expedient decisions or miss opportunities rather than having the luxury to absorb, process, and analyze the information to make well-informed judgments.

The interviewees recognized that investments in intelligence collection and education would increase understanding. However, many officials expressed frustration with policymakers who often chose to not make the investments necessary to increase the knowledge base. These officials reasoned that decisions not to invest prior to a crisis were due to resource issues, political concerns, or again, a lack of understanding.

Some officials reasoned that policymakers often hesitated to invest resources because of the political risks involved. For example, credible intelligence is often gained from human interaction but a decision to send Americans to foreign lands to collect information is inherently a risky proposition. The collectors themselves face physical risk and may be identified, captured, or killed. Decision-makers responsible for sending them into harm's way face political risk as they must answer to the American people after such an incident occurs. Although these concerns are realistic, senior counterterrorism officials and practitioners alike agreed these risks were worth taking. They asserted that it is impossible to develop an effective counterterrorism strategy without actively taking measures to invest in the resources needed to improve collective understanding. Regardless of the reason, a lack of investment results in under-informed analysis, surprises, missed opportunities, limited responses and ultimately a reactive strategy.

Perhaps most importantly, the senior counterterrorism officials interviewed were unanimously concerned with a lack of an over-arching, unified counterterrorism strategy. Every senior official interviewed expressed concern with the USG's propensity to react to crises rather than acting in accordance with an overarching counterterrorism, or ideally, a more encompassing regional strategy. Referred to as a "case-by-case" strategy, "whipsaw" strategy, and other fleeting terms, these senior leaders were immensely frustrated with the lack of a coherent, long-term strategy. They stated that when strategy is discussed, officials typically do so without an agreement of what the root problem. This lack of consensus results in "piecemeal" efforts with separate agencies developing their own individual strategies. As one senior Pentagon officer

described it, “strategies cannot be implemented without collisions in the government.”⁷ Unhelpful domestically, these “collisions” also create second and third order effects including unnecessarily confusing other nations trying to forge their own strategies vis-à-vis the United States.

The CTC members interviewed also expressed frustration over the difficulty in arriving at decisions further compounding the issue of a lack of a holistic strategy. Whereas AQ has decentralized, the USG trended toward centralization, resulting in a more reactive CT strategy. One senior counterterrorism official feared “the trend towards centralized decision making is going to get worse.”⁸ The official surmised this as expected and natural due to the politicization of every terrorist related incident that occurs. Several different senior leaders complained of a reactive “Washington Post” - based prioritization focusing only on what was immediately urgent. Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta drew attention to this problem as well in his February 6, 2013 speech at Georgetown when he said, “Today, crisis drives policy. It has become too politically convenient to simply allow a crisis to develop and get worse and then react to the crisis.”⁹ Terrorist attacks that garnered media attention such as the events in Benghazi and the Amenas oil refinery rightly claimed the full attention of policymakers. However, understanding the situation was limited at best because the USG did not make appropriate investments prior to the emerging crises. This limited understanding resulted in a slow decision-making process, a virtually non-existent strategy, and reactionary options that were fleeting in nature.

Interviewees unanimously discussed the importance of relationships and most officials discussed relationships in a more positive light than the other four elements.

Senior counterterrorism officials attributed the successes throughout the last decade-plus of operations to the network of relationships between counterterrorism professionals from across the community. Based on numerous shared experiences since 9/11, an informal network evolved that was built upon a culture of individual trust and shared purpose. Senior counterterrorism officials felt confident these individual relationships would endure beyond 2014. Mid-level leaders and practitioners were less optimistic that the network would endure, but felt just as strongly about the importance of the relationships. All recognized that this network of relationships were worthy of continued reinforcement.

With this input in mind, it is helpful to outline a framework for an effective counterterrorism policy. As highlighted above, the interviews resulted in the identification of five elements that are critical to such a policy: understanding, investments, strategy, decision-making process, and relationships. These elements are individually important but are also interdependent and together create a CT Cycle. A culture of shared purpose and trust is the bedrock that fostered the evolutions of these five elements. The decisions made with regard to these elements ultimately determine the success or failure of U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF THE THREAT ENVIRONMENT. In

counterterrorism parlance, experts refer to “understanding” in military articles and publications as “seeing the network.” In reality, the goal is “understanding the network.” This is more than semantics. “Seeing” implies a visual understanding of locations and linkages between personalities of a network. While this is important, it is not enough. “Understanding” the network includes “seeing” but also implies a greater sense of why

the network exists in the first place, its strengths, vulnerabilities, motivations, how the surrounding environment influences it and how the network reacts to any action against individual nodes of the network. This environment includes enemy, friendly, and other influencers. While more difficult to achieve, understanding the network, and ultimately understanding the environment, is of paramount importance. It ultimately informs the desired strategy when countering a network and the process necessary to achieve that strategy. Without it, even the most thoughtful and robust actions may not achieve the desired effect, and in fact, may be achieving the opposite effect. Finally, policymakers and practitioners alike should seek a comprehensive understanding of the overall environment to address if the network itself is the true issue or if it is an altogether different issue or combination of problems that the USG needs to solve. A comprehensive understanding enables a holistic view of not only the enemy situation but the “friendly” situation as well. It helps policymakers to come to a consensus of the true problem at hand and ultimately determine the correct strategy to employ.

RESOURCE INVESTMENTS. Whether time, money, effort, collection platform, or some other resource, investments are inherently costly and usually incur some level of risk. These costs and associated risks may be financial, physical, or political in nature and are seldom popular. Making a decision to commit resources is often difficult and becomes tougher when competing with other priorities or the threat is not readily apparent. Much like investing today’s money into a savings account, there is a short-term cost associated with trying to achieve a longer-term goal. However, the USG will pay a larger cost in the future if the today’s investment does not take place. In the counterterrorism realm, these investments today, despite the risks they incur, are

necessary in order to have a more complete understanding of a situation and creation of an effective strategy and overarching counterterrorism policy. Some of the more prevalent investments specifically noted by senior counterterrorism officials were relationships, collection capabilities, and education.

STRATEGY. Informed by a comprehensive understanding that was itself informed through investments, policymakers need to develop an appropriate counterterrorism strategy. As defined by Joint Staff Publication 3.0, “Strategy” is “A prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives.”¹⁰ Many factors are considered in the development of a strategy and therefore the more comprehensive the understanding, the better. A counterterrorism strategy may be reactive or proactive; defensive or offensive; erratic or sustained. It may be focused on disruption or defeat via attrition or annihilation. It can be short-term or long-term; local, regional or global in nature. It may be a strategy unto itself or it may be a part of a larger strategy. Regardless, the strategy will ultimately lead to an implementation process.

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS. With regard to counterterrorism, the process is the means by which the strategy moves from the national to the operational levels. From a decision-making process at the highest levels of the National Command Authority, to the tactical mission of a forward deployed special operations or CIA team, the process is only as good as the overall strategy. The process includes how efficiently an organization manages information and makes decisions. The process may be rigid or adaptive, linear or cyclical, slow or fast, or hierarchical or decentralized.

Significantly, the CTC can execute the process in a centralized or decentralized manner.

RELATIONSHIPS. The network of counterterrorism professionals – or the CT Community – is the engine behind the four elements listed above. This counterterrorism network consists of all entities involved with counterterrorism either directly or indirectly. These include elements of but are not limited to, the National Counterterrorism Center, Central Intelligence Agency, Department of Defense (including the Special Operations Command, Defense Intelligence Agency, Joint Special Operations Command, and others), Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of the Treasury, and other organizations as necessary. Without an effective network, each of the elements listed above would be an individual effort or a piecemeal approach that would be de-synchronized at best and create collisions and be counter-productive in the worst-case scenario. A network can be centralized or decentralized, individually focused or unified in effort, built upon suspicion or trust.

The CT Cycle is the implementation of these five elements. These five elements are inter-related. Every element is also critical to the CT Cycle; if one does not consider an element, then the entire cycle collapses. An optimized CT Cycle creates repeated systemic pressure resulting in the rapid degradation of an enemy network faster and more effectively than that network's ability to regenerate and accomplish its goals. Finally, any friction that exists between any two elements or within an element itself degrades the framework as a whole. A culture of shared purpose and trust reduces this friction and is the central core around which the five elements revolve. An organizational culture of shared purpose and trust among the CTC members is the core

of the framework. Edgar Schein, a respected theorist of the topic, defined organizational culture as, “A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems that has worked well enough to be considered valid and is passed on to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.”¹¹ This definition has important implications for CT. First, the shared beliefs are passed down to the new members within the CTC ensuring that the culture can outlast the people belonging to organizations within the community. It also suggests that the accepted way of perceiving, thinking, and feeling, may create varying levels of motivation to achieve the CTC’s goals.

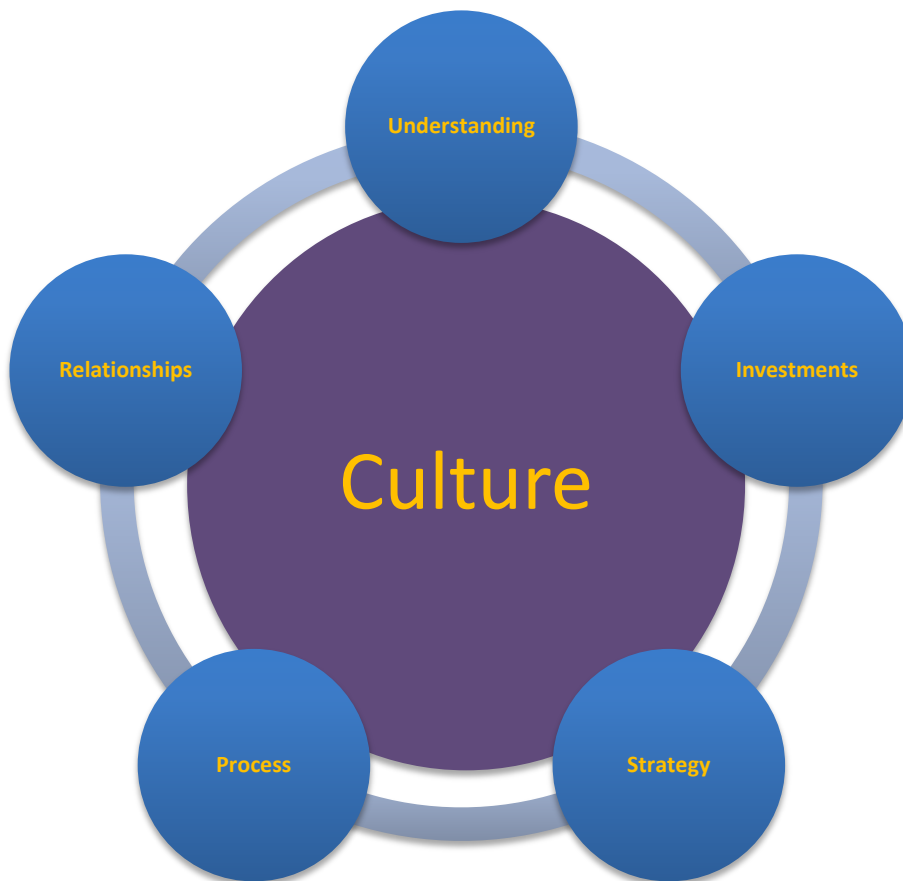


Figure (1) CT Cycle

The CT Cycle and Iraq

Although the five elements of the CT Cycle are currently lacking at the strategic level, the authors' analysis demonstrates that all five were present at the operational level for CT actions in Iraq from 2005 to 2009. The authors recognize the uniqueness of this environment but assert that an examination of the CT Cycle in Iraq offers applicable lessons for policymakers to adapt to Washington D.C. interagency operations as well as counterterrorism efforts beyond combat zones.

A Shared Understanding of the Threat. The initial counterterrorism strategy called for an approach that focused on targeting individuals. As David Segalini recently wrote in the *Small Wars Journal*, "from the outset, the U.S. took the approach of treating Al Qaeda as a group of individuals to be killed or captured through surrender--a military objective-- instead of an organization to be thoroughly understood and penetrated for the purposes of systematically dismantling it permanently."¹² The approach in Iraq was no different and U.S. military leaders initially focused on the "deck of cards" consisting of High Value Individuals (HVIs) of the former Iraqi regime. While helpful in setting priorities, this approach mistook the threat and focused on the wrong objectives. This approach continued after U.S. forces transitioned from targeting Saddam's inner circle to AQI.

With limited understanding of the threat and this type of targeting approach in mind, analysts found it challenging to pull together enough information to produce targeting information for the initial operations in Iraq. Limited information increased the risks of already dangerous operations. Elements that conducted these operations fed limited information back to the analysts and in turn, operators received little feedback. A

CT Cycle of operations did not exist and was impossible without a comprehensive understanding of the enemy network. The lack of trust and shared purpose between the CTC and conventional military units exacerbated this situation. Organizations did not share information and deployed units fought individual battles rather than a coordinated campaign.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff J7 highlights the pitfalls of not understanding the environment in a June 2012 lessons learned document: "In operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, a failure to recognize, acknowledge, and accurately define the operational environment led to a mismatch between forces, capabilities, missions, and goals."¹³ It was in Iraq that the ineffectiveness of this strategy became apparent with the very evident growth and evolution of AQI under the direction of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (AMZ). Iraq became the main effort and focus for Al Qaeda as UBL "characterized the insurgency in Iraq as the central battle."¹⁴ AMZ optimized AQI efforts and the level of violence rose to an unprecedented high under his direction despite the tens of thousands of coalition forces in Iraq at that time.¹⁵

General Stanley McChrystal, in charge of a special operations task force in Iraq at the time, realized that his task force needed to create and then optimize its own cycle to counter the network and operational cycle of AQI. The first step was acquiring a comprehensive understanding of AQI. He understood that the mission needed to evolve from targeting individuals to defeating a network. The fight now focused on intelligence.¹⁶

The merger of operations and intelligence was an important first step. The connection of intelligence to operations is not a new realization, but the blurring or in

some cases, the erasure of lines between operations and intelligence is unique. Understanding the value of intelligence, operators empowered analysts and became deeply involved themselves. Referring to his time as the commander of TF 714, General McChrystal wrote, “Operators, the Brahmins within TF 714, developed deep respect for the intelligence professionals. They became better operators by learning to think like analysts and by acquiring vast knowledge about the enemy. Both analysts and operators increasingly owned the mission, which in turn increased the activity on the ground by moving targeting decisions down the ranks.”¹⁷ Operators often developed collection plans, participated in shifts to scrutinize remote video feeds, and briefed the enemy situation to higher headquarters. They also aggressively challenged the Intelligence Community to bring outdated intelligence policies into the present, developed techniques for cutting edge collection methods, communicated with pilots to direct sensors and increase responsiveness, and continually pushed analysts to become more precise.

The average operator possessed enough knowledge on the enemy network to free the analysts to probe deeper into the nuances and move beyond “seeing the network” to “understanding the network.” At the same time, intelligence professionals increasingly “owned” the mission. With the freedom to step back and actively pursue an in-depth understanding of the enemy network and the surrounding environment, intelligence leaders possessed a greater grasp of the impact of operations overall. Similar to the shared responsibility for intelligence, analysts delved into the operations realm, often recommending changes in the operational geographic footprint, shifts in the main effort, and organizational changes.

This merger of operations and intelligence could exist because members of this organization were secure enough to expand their own roles and let others delve into their jobs as well. Without a strong base of confidence, such an expansion of roles would likely have created anxiety and turmoil rather than optimization. The culture that fostered this sense of shared purpose increased the effectiveness of both operations and intelligence and was one of the most important accelerants of the CT Cycle.

Resource Investments. Although the merger of operations and intelligence paid immediate dividends, more investments were necessary. McChrystal and other leaders aggressively pushed for more resources to increase intelligence collection and the overall understanding of the threat. Collection assets including Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) and other airborne and ground-based platforms rapidly began arriving in theater. The capabilities needed to take advantage of, or exploit, the collected information also arrived in the form of technology as well as personnel. Leaders pushed for other resources such as building materials to create state of the art command and control headquarters and large maintenance facilities for the various air and ground vehicles. Communication systems and bandwidth were some of the most important investments. The establishment of a robust communications infrastructure enabled the understanding and ultimate success of a decentralized network. Finally, even unlimited resources would be useless without the right people to take advantage of and optimize their effectiveness.

Although resources were not unlimited, Iraq was the priority and there was little external competition. The fight for resources was instead a luxury the U.S. military could internally engage in with teams at the tactical level vying between each other for

assets. Additionally, with a military commander empowered to make decisions, resources were quickly prioritized and inherent risks understood and quickly accepted or denied as necessary.

Reinforce Relationships. The investments in people were more important than hardware. General McChrystal, in charge of a special operations task force in Iraq at the time, realized that his task force needed to create and then optimize its own cycle to counter the network and operational cycle of AQI. He wrote, “The change was historic ... we changed how we were organized and how we made decisions, we grew a new culture ... we continually added partners” and changed from a primary product of finishing capability into a primary product of a “formidable network.”¹⁸

The CTC took immediate steps to start building a network of intelligence professionals. This network was more than “reach back” support where intelligence agencies in Washington D.C. provided broad support to deployed forces. Instead, this effort entailed bringing analysts and experts from across the USG forward to the fight, enabling them to more effectively collaborate with each other and more directly support operations. Given the number of disparate agencies involved, agreements to establish an expeditionary approach to support had to be informal “handshake” agreements.

General McChrystal and his task force first had to convince agencies that sending their people forward was a worthwhile investment. Ultimately, numerous organizations fought to become members of this growing network, at times sending managers forward to convince the counterterrorism force that their people could be value-added. This forward deployed network of experts augmented intelligence staffs at

headquarters levels, but importantly, was also pushed down to the most tactical levels possible.

These efforts resulted in an intelligence team that was a collaborative conglomeration of national experts highly focused on a very specific threat. They represented the power of the U.S. Intelligence Community combined with partner intelligence agencies. Numerous leaders of the participating organizations often visited and remarked that this was the most effective inter-agency organization they had seen. One senior DoD intelligence official stated, “The one revolution I’ve seen between then [2003] and now [2008] is the joint interagency task force.”¹⁹

The idea that “it takes a network to defeat a network” required not just a collection of counterterrorism specialists, but also a culture of shared purpose and trust among these entities. Trust is perhaps the most important cultural element required among the members of any group or team, particularly those involved with dangerous, high consequence and intense missions such as counterterrorism. Building trust usually requires shared experiences and, significantly, in the case of counterterrorism, this means sharing information. For many within the CTC more accustomed to protecting information, sharing was an inherently difficult task and often considered risky behavior. However, as the importance of intelligence in the CT Cycle became clear and trust within the network grew, the idea of cross-leveling intelligence began to gain acceptance and therefore momentum over time. By 2006, particularly in Iraq, information began to flow more freely. For example, by 2007, a worldwide audience of thousands of people associated with the counterterrorism mission viewed video-conferences hosted by TF 714.²⁰ Sharing information was not the only

demonstration of trust, but it was one of the most important. In many cases, sharing information was the primary contribution for members of the CTC. The network strengthened, understanding grew, and information became a means to an end rather than the end itself.

De-centralized Decision-making Processes. The increases in efficiency and effectiveness that transpired could not have occurred without delegation and a decentralized decision making process. Sustained operations were required to disrupt AQI. General McChrystal wrote, “TF 714 needed to become a more complex organization with unprecedented capability, and we needed to employ that on a daily- and nightly- basis, year after year.”²¹ He eventually changed his task force from a traditional hierarchical based organization with a linear counterterrorism approach, into a unique counterterrorism network utilizing an optimized CT Cycle. He repeatedly remarked that his task force should “delegate until you are uncomfortable then delegate some more.”²² This required an assumption of risk by leaders at every level. As early as 2003, General Raymond Odierno, then commander of 4th Infantry Division, recognized this as well, “Accomplishing this took a relentless pursuit of the enemy by organizations whose senior leaders were willing to underwrite appropriate levels of risk to accomplishing the mission without handicapping their force.”²³ This assumption of risk is a necessary element to both delegation and decentralization and ultimately to successful counterterrorism operations overall. De-centralization coupled with the merger of intelligence with operations led to devastating effects against enemy networks.

Along with the continuously improving process, the network itself continued to improve. However, as with any complex network consisting of multiple organizations, issues periodically arose. When faced with obstacles, individuals would pursue all avenues to ensure the best support possible to the mission. Significantly, Iraq and Afghanistan were designated theaters of war, which meant the military was in charge. While military leaders did not have the authority to compel the different agencies within the CTC to do anything, they generally recognized as having the lead in most cases. A decision-maker, military leaders in this case, with the ability to focus the various representatives of the USG, could bring to bear the national power of the U.S. on a singular mission. The need for this role was noted in the 9/11 Report as members of the commission asked, “Who is the quarterback? The other players are in their positions, doing their jobs. But who is calling the play that assigns roles to help them execute as a team?”²⁴ The combat zones of Iraq and Afghanistan enabled the military to provide commanders to “be the quarterback” ensuring unity of effort among the participants. This shared purpose in turn ensured that the power of the United States’ CT Community focused on improving the understanding of the network as well as the ability to attack the network.

*Over time I have concluded that achieving unity of effort, operating on the ground among the population and maintaining constant pressure on the networks are enduring characteristics of successful operations.*²⁵

- GEN Odierno, Chief of Staff of the Army

Sustained Pressure. Counterterrorism forces maximized and leveraged their resources to strike more targets through this shared and increased knowledge of the

enemy network. It became routine to strike a target and develop two more follow-on targets due to the now cyclical nature of targeting. Previously, a team would conduct a raid and immediately return to base. As operators became more involved in the intelligence process they improved their ability to recognize intelligence opportunities while on an objective. Even before leaving an objective area, a team could plan and later conduct follow on raids based upon recently gleaned intelligence. Collection assets could immediately be re-tasked to “feed” the cycle and start to collect additional information. This process evolution was captured by General McChrystal noting that in 2004, the average number of operations was approximately 20 and by 2006, “we would average more than three hundred per month against a faster, smarter enemy and with greater precision and intelligence yield.”²⁶

In a September 2007 it became clear that sustained operations in Iraq were not enough. A U.S. SOF raid uncovered a vast amount of intelligence detailing the hometowns of over 700 foreign fighters arriving in Iraq since August of 2006.²⁷ With this continuous supply of fighters and suicide bombers, AQI could continue to support their own operational cycle. The CTC had to drive a process that expanded its reach exponentially. This information clearly held strategic implications. However, if this information was handled in the routine manner and kept in classified intelligence channels, a unique opportunity to immediately impact the regional flow of fighters into Iraq would be missed. General McChrystal made a potentially risky decision to declassify the information and disseminate it as widely as possible across the international intelligence and law enforcement community. This dramatic expansion of the network – even if only temporary – assisted in the unprecedented arrest of at least

twenty individuals in nine different countries associated with the recruitment of suicide bombers.²⁸ Governments of the countries of origin had their own concerns with losing young men to AQI recruiting efforts and in most cases took measures to halt this situation. The combined effect of the international pressure outside of Iraq and the optimized CT Cycle inside Iraq led to a dramatic drop in foreign fighters, starving AQI of its needed pipeline for successful high profile attacks. Only a month later suicide bombings fell to sixteen “half the number seen during the summer months and down sharply from a peak of fifty-nine in March.”²⁹ This drop in numbers of suicide bombers was one of the CTC’s largest effects against AQ overall in terms of the scope of efforts and resulting impact.

While the above evolutions were significant, they were not sufficient. The CTC faced numerous challenges in both theaters of war as the frictions associated with host nation sovereignty took hold. The CTC remained adaptive and able to optimize the CT Cycle. U.S. forces initially conducted unilateral operations but soon began working closely with host nation representatives. Eventually, U.S. forces assumed a supporting role as Iraqi and Afghan forces took the lead. Host nation legal systems took hold and it became mandatory to work within confusing and chaotic judicial processes. Warrant based targeting, chain of custody of evidence, witness statements, judges, and generally working within the host nation legal framework all became part of the CT Cycle. Forward deployed forces had to adjust their techniques throughout this evolution. An inflexible network could not have adapted and maintained an optimized CT Cycle without continuous innovation.

The optimization of the CT Cycle enabled the CTC to disrupt AQI's own operational cycle. In the case of Iraq, AQI could not survive while under this type of relentless, sustained pressure and were not able to recover until U.S. forces were pulled out of the country. As a designated combat zone, Iraq offered a unique opportunity for the CTC to optimize all five elements of the CT Cycle. Members of the CTC operated with a clear mission to defeat AQI. Although not formally in charge of the entire CTC, a military commander was in charge of forward operations and could unify and focus the efforts of the community. Senior officials across the USG were committed to applying significant resources to the effort in Iraq as risks to not invest were higher than those incurred by investing. These resource investments enhanced the shared understanding of the threat environment leading to a clear strategy of sustained pressure against AQI. A de-centralized decision-making process enabled the implementation of this strategy, enabling practitioners to not only capitalize upon but also create opportunities. The network of relationships was built upon trust earned in a combat environment that could transcend the habitual frictions that occurred in Washington D.C. Some of these factors behind the success of the CT Cycle in Iraq are unique. However, it is possible for policymakers to adapt many of these operational lessons learned at the strategic level.

Adapting the CT Framework at the Strategic Level

Policymakers at the strategic level can adapt the CT Cycle to improve U.S. counterterrorism strategy both within the interagency process in Washington and in areas beyond combat zones where AQAA and other terrorist groups are operating. While the factors behind the CT successes in Iraq were unique and operational in nature they can be applied at the strategic level as a blueprint for effectively disrupting a

terrorist network and setting the course for the defeat of AQAA in particular. The CT Cycle will assist policy makers in understanding the ramifications of past and future decisions with regard to the overall counterterrorism strategy to defeat AQAA. A sub optimized CT Cycle may result in disruptive episodic efforts but will not result in the defeat of a network.

Inside Washington D.C.

Shared Understanding of the Threat Environment. The same level of emphasis that the CTC placed on shared intelligence in Iraq translates to increased emphasis on the importance of shared understanding across interagency members in Washington. The events of 9/11 initially increased this emphasis though the “learning curve” was steep . From the inability of the U.S. intelligence community to synthesize the warning signs of the impending attack, to military and diplomatic planners hamstrung by incomplete information, to the American population trying to understand what AQ even was, the entire country had to suddenly come to grips with what was considered to be a new threat. While a cadre of analysts across the government and military were knowledgeable about al Qaeda, these experts were limited. Commenting on the events of 9/11, the former commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) General John Abizaid explained the unpreparedness of the CT Community by citing the “lack of intelligence, trained forces on the ground and little situational awareness on terrorists. We thought we could take our CT forces and move them decisively to the right place and kill people at the right time...There were very few people dedicated to the problem, and all of a sudden the shift in our focus showed there were huge intelligence gaps.”³⁰ The acknowledgement of these shortcomings in investments and

knowledge provided the impetus for change throughout the USG. President Bush in his 2002 *National Security Strategy* acknowledged the need for immense change stating, “the major institutions of American National Security were designed in a different era to meet different requirements. All of them must be transformed.”³¹

Policymakers today can adapt the CT Cycle to ensure continued emphasis remains on the goal of a comprehensive and shared understanding of the threat environment. Senior USG officials should ensure the transformations made in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 to increase shared awareness across the Intelligence Community remain relevant and adhered to appropriately. Most importantly, continued growth in understanding an evolving threat required continued investment of resources.

Resource Investments. Realizing the USG needed investments to better understand and counter the threat after 9/11, policymakers initially supported the increase in funding, collection, and authorities for the CTC. While necessary, these investments were not a panacea. Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of AQ and their operating environment took time. These investments increased situational awareness among national policy and decision-makers, enabling detailed discussions on second and third order effects of counterterrorism operations. These evolutions also enabled the CTC to increase its knowledge and ultimately become a more intertwined network, better prepared to establish an effective CT Cycle in both Afghanistan and Iraq. However as AQ continues to adapt, the CTC must also adapt their efforts to understand the effect on the AQ network and the environment. Addressing this deficit in understanding will require investments and continual assessments in order to maintain sustain pressure on enemy networks.

Although policymakers cannot universally mimic the robust investments that led to success in Iraq, they can recognize that certain investments were critical to a comprehensive and shared understanding of AQI. Prioritized and focused collection assets must be coupled with a cadre of CT professionals with the ability to exploit the resultant information. Senior USG leaders must also invest in the education of CT professionals so they can become true experts in their trade. Resources must be allocated to the continued strengthening and expansion of the network that links these professionals together and was so instrumental in the CT successes in Iraq.

Sustained Pressure. Similar to the success U.S. forces achieved in Iraq through constant pressure on the enemy, the U.S. counterterrorism strategy requires sustained pressure to counter AQAA and other terrorist threats. However, prior to 9/11, little pressure was applied to these enemy networks. In June of 2001, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations in Low Intensity Conflict (ASD/SOLIC) hired Professor Richard Schultz as a consultant to investigate why Special Operating Forces (SOF) was not leveraged in response to previous AQ attacks against the United States. He surmised these findings in “Showstoppers: Nine reasons why we never sent our SOF after AQ before 9/11.” During an interview, Mike Sheehan, the former Department of State Coordinator for Counterterrorism, summarized one aspect of these findings. Sheehan explained the Pentagon’s response to aggressive counterterrorism proposals. “The Pentagon wanted to fight and win the nation’s wars as Colin Powell used to say. But those were wars against the armies of other nations- not against diffuse transnational terrorist threats ... it took a 757 crashing into the Pentagon for them to get it.”³² Even had the Pentagon wanted to take on more or a role, the

characterization of counterterrorism as a law enforcement issue relegated the Department of Defense to a part time member of the CT Community. Former Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army General Peter Schoomaker stated, “Criminalization had a profound impact on the Pentagon. It [Pentagon] came to see terrorism as “not up to the standard of our definition of war, and therefore not worthy of our attention ... And because it is not war, and we don’t act like we’re at war, many of the Defense Department’s tools are off the table.”³³

The USG eventually incorporated the capabilities of the Department of Defense and other organizations into a counterterrorism strategy of sustained pressure. On September 14, 2001 Congress created the Authorized Use of Military Force (AUMF), a legal framework from which to base counterterrorism efforts. This framework supported the new proactive strategy, enabling the CTC to move from an anti-terrorism approach to a counterterrorism approach. The U.S. National Security Strategy in 2002 was aggressive and broad, threatening nations who harbored terrorists and focused specifically on denying sanctuary. Over time, as the collective knowledge about the threat increased, the strategy to counter the threat could be more explicit. For example, the U.S. National Counterterrorism Strategy in 2012 specifically focused on al Qaeda’s adherents and affiliates and highlighted particular areas “tailored to the regions, domains, and groups that are most important.”³⁴ However, the AUMF remains, providing the legal framework to support continuous pressure.

Still, the practical application of this strategy, and the process itself, remained in flux. The CTC lacked an official process to seek authority to kill and capture terrorists worldwide. The Pentagon developed a hunting list for Secretary of Defense Donald

Rumsfeld to seek President Bush's approval in the form of an executive order. "But this case by case approach took time, often times the covert forces did not have before an AQ commander might slip away" and the Pentagon "looked for ways to speed up the process."³⁵

Although propagating the conditions that led a successful, aggressive offensive strategy in Iraq is difficult outside of a combat zone, policymakers may still consider some of the benefits of a continuous CT Cycle. Sustained pressure does not necessarily mean kinetic operations. This pressure can also take the form of indirect action from an increased emphasis on an effective counter-narrative campaign to partnering with host nation CT forces.

Decision-making Process. The decentralized decision-making process in Iraq was critical to the successful execution of a strategy of sustained pressure. Although decisions at the strategic level cannot be as decentralized as those at the operational level, there may still be room for improvement. Some of the senior CT officials spoke of "missed opportunities" to target terrorist threats as policymakers debated the larger politically sensitive and legally complex issues such as extradition, support to partner nations conducting CT operations, intelligence collection and other actions outside of combat zones. One senior CT official noted that the USG cannot defeat a decentralized adaptive network such as AQAA with such a centralized and slow decision-making process.³⁶

To address these concerns, the CTC must find ways to speed up, if not decentralize the decision-making process. The Department of Defense developed a Chairman's Video Teleconference process to recommend targeting opportunities for

principal level and higher decisions. One senior level Defense official remarked, “this is the only process I’m aware of in the USG where every principal assembles; and sometimes unpredictably makes a decision recommendation to the President.”³⁷ Originally developed under the Bush administration, different forms of this process have evolved under President Barrack Obama. That too has changed with the White House decision to modify the system ensuring the Pentagon and the National Security Council “had overlapping roles.”³⁸ Mr. John Brennan’s tenure as the National Security Advisor for Counterterrorism was perhaps most noteworthy due to his reportedly central role in the decision-making process. According to former NCTC Director Mike Leiter, Mr. Brennan removed the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the chair for these meetings due to his desire not to have those pulling the triggers running the process.³⁹ Mr. Brennan and the Administration also supported the transition of the National Counterterrorism Center into a targeting entity. In an effort to develop a process based upon legal footing, Mr. Brennan also continued to develop a “CT playbook” that detailed the actions surrounding the CT drone strike campaigns.⁴⁰ The CTC must continue to adapt in these and similar ways to ensure that the missed opportunities highlighted by senior CT officials are minimized.

Reinforce Relationships. The network of relationships that developed in Iraq was the foundation for the success of the CT Cycle. This lesson may not be as easy to apply in Washington D.C. with an environment that tends to separate rather than unite different organizations. Nevertheless, a senior CT official noted how far the relationships between CTC members had come stating that in all of his interagency meetings at the deputies’ level and above he had never been surprised by one of his

peer organizations. He assessed this was a testament to the great relationships that had developed over the last decade stating, “there may have been disagreement but there was never distrust.”⁴¹ A separate senior official when asked about the need for memorandums of agreement to institutionalize arrangements between the organizations felt that these memorandums would actually inhibit relationships that are inherently better when informally created through shared purpose and trust. The question is whether these relationships will endure without the catalyst of the war zones. Policymakers may consider formalizing the identification of the responsible agency in CT efforts outside of combat zones. They may also consider formalizing mandatory interagency experience before officials can progress to senior levels within the CTC.

Outside the Combat Zones.

Shared Understanding of the Environment. The importance of utilizing the CT Cycle and prioritizing intelligence is applicable beyond combat zones. As highlighted by the senior CT officials interviewed for this study, a shared understanding of the environment is necessary to achieve a clear strategy. However, this type of understanding is difficult to achieve when dealing with multiple terrorist groups using remote areas for safe havens. The expansion of AQAA and the fallout from the Arab Spring adds to the complexity. For example, despite numerous threats to the U.S. homeland from al-Shabaab in Somalia, it took nearly a decade for the USG to officially designate al-Shabaab as a terrorist organization. This added to the difficulty of establishing a consensus on the efforts needed to counter al-Shabaab until approximately 2008. Similarly, in April 2013 Senator McCain and Ambassador

Sheehan voiced distinct differences when describing the future threat of AQIM after the French cease their offensive operations in Mali.⁴²

Additionally, the types of operations conducted in areas outside combat zones do not enhance the level of understanding as they did in Iraq. For example, one of the most important counterterrorism evolutions in recent years is the dramatic increase in drone strikes under the Obama administration in Pakistan and their effect against AQ. From 2008 to 2010 the administration supported a continued proactive strategy, authorizing triple the number of drone strikes from 36 in 2008 to 122 in 2010.⁴³ However, these strikes do not support an optimal CT Cycle. Without the ability to gather information post-attack, the understanding of the impacts of the strike on the terrorist network is limited at best. The raid to kill UBL was the most symbolic defeat AQ suffered but the CTC's continued systemic pressure across the network is just as, if not more, important. The "treasure-trove" of information garnered during the raid enabled follow-on operations and a better understanding of the organization.⁴⁴ Following the UBL raid the CT Community killed AQ's external operations chief Ilyas Kashmiri in June 2011 and AQ's "general manager," Atiyah abd al-Rahman al Libi in August.⁴⁵ The effects were dramatic and disrupted the cycle of operations of AQ emanating from the FATA.

Policymakers may adapt lessons learned from the successful implementation of the CT Cycle in Iraq by continuously emphasizing the need to improve the USG's shared understanding of the threat environment. This emphasis must be backed up by decisions to actively improve this understanding. Committing resources to this effort is the first step.

Resource Investments. Although the CTC cannot replicate the robust investments applied to the CT Cycle in Iraq to all areas requiring CT attention, policymakers may still take note of the benefits of actively pursuing a comprehensive understanding of the threat. All of the officials interviewed understood that resources were limited given the new economic reality and competing requirements. However, most agreed that investments were still needed if the CTC is expected to have a shared understanding of the threat environment. These investments did not have to be monetarily large but would likely incur some political risk. For example, in Yemen, it is important to note that successful disruptive kinetic actions could not have occurred without the proper level of investments including teaming with Yemeni CT forces. These investments were not without risk as Yemen struggles to find the balance of a new progressive government with that of security and its desire to not appear too closely linked with the United States. While the outcome of this transition still remains to be seen, the USG has managed to maintain proper relations with the factions of the Yemeni government that have allowed the continuation of the drone strike campaign and other partner nation military relationships. The same line of thinking holds true for Somalia. Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF HOA) stood up shortly after 9/11 and is based out of Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti. Today it is part of Africa Command (AFRICOM) and is home to approximately 1,800 military personnel. This small footprint and investment has proved invaluable in providing critical support to stabilizing the Horn of Africa.

On the other hand, in March 2012, the U.S. ambassador to Mali cancelled manned surveillance flights over the country. He did this over fears of endangering the flight crews' lives should they crash and be captured by the militants.⁴⁶ Part of the

Ambassador's decision to stop these flights was due to physical risk of the crew should they crash and possibly become hostages.⁴⁷ While the Ambassador's decision was based upon the near term political risk it actually compounded the long-term risk by reducing the ability to understand the network at a critical juncture. Without an internationally accepted Malian government it is easy to understand the ambassador's concern. Particularly in the post Arab Spring environment, it is imperative that policymakers balance legitimate political concerns with needed counterterrorism investments.

Sustained Pressure. The combat zone of Iraq acted as a catalyst to radically influence the evolution of the counterterrorism strategy resulting in a successful CT Cycle designed to apply sustained pressure on the enemy. However, in the more complex environments outside the combat zones, the CTC evolved at a different pace and faced different challenges. For example, on July 17, 2007 the White House issued an intelligence assessment acknowledging the "strategy of fighting AQ in Pakistan had failed" and stating the "U.S. was losing ground on a number of fronts."⁴⁸ The decapitation strategy used in the Federally Administered Tribal Area will disrupt but not defeat AQ unless it is supported by systemic pressure across the whole network. This systemic and sustained pressure can create opportunities to address the larger issue of the attraction of the AQ brand and ideology.

In Yemen, the CTC attempted to "'get ahead of the curve' on terrorism that had become so difficult in Pakistan."⁴⁹ Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Mr. John Brennan stated, "There are aspects of the Yemen program that I think are a true model of what I think the U.S. counterterrorism community should

be doing to fight the spread of al-Qaeda in Northern Africa.” According to the *Long War Journal*, the United States conducted forty-two drone strikes in 2012 in Yemen⁵⁰ killing key AQAP operatives.⁵¹ However, the U.S. strategy included some indirect efforts as well. Mr Brennan fostered a joint U.S.-Saudi Arabia policy that helped “bring a more cooperative government to power” and “address ‘upstream’ problems of poverty and poor governance that led to ‘downstream’ radicalization.’⁵² Still, questions remain as to the overarching strategy in Yemen. One senior CT official questioned, “Is our strategy to disrupt imminent attacks against the U.S. homeland or is it to truly defeat AQAP and assist the regime in stabilizing their country?”⁵³

Policymakers may consider adapting the strategy of sustained pressure that successfully worked in Iraq. This pressure worked in Iraq because it focused on a network rather than individuals. In the same way, policymakers may emphasize the importance of expanding current CTC efforts to include a more comprehensive campaign to pressure AQAA networks. As in the case of Yemen, this pressure goes beyond kinetic operations and includes indirect influencers.

Decision-making Processes. For several years after 9/11 the established decision-making process at the highest levels of the USG was not optimized to support an effective CT Cycle. According to journalists Eric Schmidt and Thom Shanker in their book *Counter Strike*, experts from across the CT Community would meet to discuss the intelligence and return to write recommendations for the next interagency meeting to review the set of options. This process “never fully integrated the governments’ resources and expertise.” A change in the process, level of understanding and reinvigorating the sense of shared purpose that was evident after 9/11 was needed in

order to develop a more proactive strategy. A 2007 threat to the U.S. homeland and Europe emanating from Pakistan provided the catalyst needed to adapt the process. The CT Community recognized the serious nature of this threat as well as the need to make the necessary changes to counter this threat to the homeland. The CT Community met repeatedly and developed a common intelligence picture “as well as potential action plans that complemented and coordinated with each other. It was a lesson drawn directly from the failures of 9/11.”⁵⁴ NCTC Director Leiter commented, “What changed was senior officials from every department and agency, overseas, and domestic, were coming together with a common intelligence operating picture saying ‘This is exactly what we’re seeing, and this is what we are going to do about it’”⁵⁵ Leiter developed the “horse blanket” - a product for the president, policymakers, and the CTC to quickly understand the threat. It provides responses and correlating costs “in terms of treasure, manpower, and economic impact of each option.”⁵⁶ Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Fran Townsend also commented, “we had an ability to surge the system in a very focused way and do it on a worldwide scale”⁵⁷

This was a monumental evolution in the CT Community realm. Previously the process included decision makers from across the USG for high profile kill/capture operations. Developing this type of unity of effort, where there was not a refined target, was a critical shift in the evolution from reactive to proactive strategies outside the combat zones. The increased level of understanding resulted from an increased amount of investment from the CTC in the areas of time, energy, focus and commitment to the shared purpose of disrupting this threat stream.

On the other hand, senior CT officials expressed frustration with gaining approval for indirect based actions at a much lower level that did not include these highly sensitive offensive operations.⁵⁸ A decentralized process does not exist for making decisions that are important to the practitioner but perhaps not worthy of extensive deliberation at the strategic level. This issue stems from an unclear strategy and concern over political risk. The case of Yemen highlights a politically sensitive area where all of the U.S foreign policy goals may not align with Yemen but they align with the AQAP threat.

Additionally, numerous senior CT officials were frustrated with the amount of time spent on discussing the operational aspects and second and third order effects of U.S. assistance to the French in Mali vice the overall strategy and desired end state. March 2013 open press reports the expansion of investing in surveillance aircraft in neighboring Niger to assist with this effort. The approach of following the lead of our international partners has increased the difficulty of developing a strategy that provides long-term direction for the CTC.

Policymakers understandably may not be able to decentralize decisions in the same way as Iraq. However, as exemplified in Iraq, speed is one of the accelerants of the CT Cycle's success. Policymakers will increase the effectiveness of the CT Cycle in areas beyond Iraq by taking any steps to speed up the decision-making cycle in Washington D.C. Ideally decisions can be delegated to regional leaders whether an ambassador or combatant commander. In the cases where this is not possible, steps should be taken to speed up the central decision-making process.

Reinforce Relationships. Much like the success combating foreign fighters in Iraq, the CTC network of relationships must exponentially expand in areas outside of

designated combat zones. Admiral McRaven recently stated “you can’t surge trust” and the key to the indirect approach to preventing conflicts is “patience, persistence and building trust with our partners.”⁵⁹ In the Horn of Africa, an expanded multi-year international unified effort against AQAA resulted in dramatic change. The CTC played a small part, focused on the most dangerous elements of al-Shabaab. The CT Community’s proactive effort, of both direct and indirect measures, disrupted al-Shabaab’s operational cycle and provided hope for the future of Somalia. These efforts focused not only on the organization, but the ideological attraction of al-Shabaab.

In Yemen, the sustained pressure that the CTC has been able to apply is partly due to the strong relationships among the U.S. interagency organizations. This shared purpose has been fueled in part due to the direct threat to the homeland. The USG relationships with the Yemeni government and security forces have been stabilizing factors as well. Similar to Pakistan and Iraq this threat stream seems to be a positive influence in the development of shared purpose in trust among the CTC.

The ability of AQAA to continue to adapt and grow suggests that the CT Cycle is not effective outside of the combat zones. The CT Community’s successes thus far have been linear in nature, resulting from singular operations against individual targets. These efforts focused on individuals who met specific criteria such as that outlined in the Authorized Use of Military Force (AUMF) ruling. The goal of targeting a network is much more difficult outside of a combat zone with inherent political sensitivities and a naturally higher level of concern with a different set of authorities and processes to gain approvals. Despite these activities, investments would have to be made and resources

committed to obtain some cursory knowledge of the enemy network. Only then can an effective strategy begin to emerge.

Because of these difficulties, the counterterrorism process outside of the combat zones has begun to revert back to the linear system used prior to 9/11. The targeting effort is focused on individuals versus networks resulting in “pinpricks” instead of a more holistic and meaningful approach. These efforts are disruptive but would be more effective if they were part of a cycle and a larger strategy. The CT Community is losing the ability to “self-inform” as limited sensitive site exploitation is available. CT operatives generally kill rather than capture targets resulting in a loss of intelligence that could potentially have been gained through the gathering of evidence on site as well as interrogations. The lack of a clear process for the handling and exploitation of detainees further compounds the complexities of developing a deeper understanding of the networks and a respective strategy. Still, the CT Community has accomplished its primary goal of protecting the homeland with these disruptive efforts. ASD/SOLIC Ambassador Mike Sheehan, recently emphasized the importance of keeping the pressure on AQAA on all fronts and highlighted the lack of successful attacks against the U.S. homeland stating ““It's more than luck ... we've put them under pressure around the world, because it's more difficult for them to train and deploy operatives, they make more mistakes.””⁶⁰ This proactive counterterrorism strategy is imperative to protecting U.S. interests and creating opportunities for the indirect measures aimed at overall defeat by eroding AQAA’s ideology and appeal.

Maintaining the Momentum – Recommendations for the Next Decade.

War... cannot be considered to have ended so long as the enemy's will has not been broken...

-Carl von Clausewitz, On War, 1832⁶¹

As stated in the U.S. *National Counter Terrorism Strategy*, “As the threats continues to evolve, our efforts to protect against those threats must evolve as well.”⁶²

In order to continue to protect the U.S. homeland and interests abroad the U.S. must continue to adapt based upon the lessons learned of the counterterrorism evolutions of the past decade plus of war. The authors make these recommendations based upon feedback from the interviews of senior counterterrorism officials and practitioners, as well as insight gained through the research of CT operations in Iraq.

1) SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF THE THREAT ENVIRONMENT. A comprehensive understanding of the overall environment in which terrorist groups prosper is the underpinning of a successful counterterrorism strategy. The CTC has “tamed” the problem and focused on the physical aspects of AQ. The CTC will continue to disrupt but will not defeat AQ without addressing their ideology. The goal of counterterrorism officials should continue to evolve from “seeing the network” (though this granular level of knowledge must remain) to “understanding the environment.” This type of understanding should include but expand well beyond the knowledge of key individuals on targeting lists and the relationships that bind them.

Counterterrorism officials also should delve into the reasons a terrorist group exists in the first place, focusing on a group’s ideological motivations as well as its other strengths and vulnerabilities. The CTC has focused on the easier problem of targeting individuals versus addressing the root causes of terrorism. Despite the realities of

limited capacity in terms of time and information, policymakers should seek to ascertain second and third order effects of their actions and inactions. The goal for policymakers and senior counterterrorism officials should be to understand and agree upon the specific problem that they see actually needs a solution. Additionally, senior counterterrorism officials must understand the equities and motivations of their partner organizations to avoid actions that inadvertently work against another's goals. An overall understanding of the environment by all players will help establish clear priorities and avoid counter-productive actions.

2). INVEST DESPITE THE RISK. The key to developing this shared understanding of the threat landscape among all CTC members is an investment in collection capabilities, education, and relationships. While decisions to invest are costly and often fraught with risk, they are necessary if the U.S. government desires a better understanding of terrorist threats in order to prevent attacks. Achieving this goal of preventing attacks requires active engagement by all members of the CTC and informed decisions by policymakers. Because resources are limited, policymakers not only have to decide whether to invest in the first place, but also have to prioritize these investments. Although a passive or reactive approach to investments will appear to be a near term prudent decision in terms of political risk and cost savings, it will incur higher political risk and cost in the long run by compounding the further degradation of understanding of the threat environment. While it is sometimes difficult and dangerous to obtain access and placement in a contested area, it is exponentially harder to do so after a crisis emerges. Failure to invest due to the risks involved may only lead to much larger risks in the future. Multiple senior CT officials suggested “intelligence failures” could be

more accurately described as “investment failures” created by decisions at policy-maker levels when requests to “invest” are denied.

Some of the more prevalent investments noted by senior counterterrorism officials and supported through the research of this paper were relationships, collection capabilities, and education. Interviewees unanimously considered relationships as the most important investment required by the members of the CTC. The employment of active collection measures was also highlighted, with the acknowledgement of the risks that would be incurred. As articulated by Army Chief of Staff General Raymond Odierno in *Foreign Policy*, “For all these reasons, preventing conflict is better than reacting to it, and to prevent it we must understand its causes. That understanding is only gained through human contact. Contact requires some form of presence. That presence can be small, and it need not be physical, but it must be within and among those societies where we aim to preserve stability and avoid conflict.”⁶³ Finally, the interviews cited education as well. Obtaining the comprehensive understanding of the environment that is necessary to develop an appropriate strategy requires a willingness to commit time and energy. A cursory grasp of the complexities involved in specific counterterrorism problems is not enough. This commitment to take the time for education is necessary at every level from policymakers to practitioners to the general public. As one senior counterterrorism official noted, “an educated American public is as important as an educated analyst.”⁶⁴

The CTC should increase the investments in the areas where AQAA has expanded. The expansion of AQI into Syria requires focused attention by CT professionals with Iraq experience. There is a dearth of expertise across the Maghreb

and Middle East where AQAA is attempting to increase their influence. This limited understanding is partially due to an ever-changing landscape resulting from the radical changes spawned from the Arab Spring. It is further compounded by the geographical challenge of AQAA operating in areas the U.S. has historically invested little time and effort from a counterterrorism perspective. Almost every senior official interviewed for this research acknowledged the difficulty in understanding these complex situations and the ramifications of any decision to be made. While some of these investments may be resource intensive like increased surveillance capability, many do not have to be. Access, placement and the authority to prepare for an emergency before it occurs can greatly increase the understanding of an environment and ultimately provide policy makers more options. These options can range from survey of areas, increased human intelligence, increased interaction with host nation security forces (even if they are not traditional partners) in order to increase the understanding of an area or part of the network. This increased interaction is even more critical for the post Arab Spring countries where the historical established relationships have been overturned and the CTC is starting anew. Approvals to conduct these actions do incur some political risk but will greatly “buy down” greater risk after an incident occurs. Investments in prioritized areas where AQAA is currently operating and expanding are prudent and critical to protecting U.S. interests.

3) MAINTAIN A STRATEGY OF SUSTAINED PRESSURE. In the post 2014 environment, policymakers should maintain a proactive counterterrorism strategy focused on prevention and preemption rather than reaction. Counterterrorism officials should outline a long-term strategy with the goal of defeat rather than merely disruption.

This requires continued direct military, intelligence and law enforcement efforts against the AQ organization but also incorporates a counter-narrative effort designed to limit the impact of ideology for terrorist support and recruiting efforts. The counterterrorism strategy should go beyond targeting individuals and focus on disrupting a network and ultimately changing the environment in which AQ and other terrorist groups prosper.

Maintaining a proactive counterterrorism posture is of paramount importance. The White House recently named Lisa Monaco as Mr. Brennan's replacement as the next Counterterrorism Advisor. Given her background in the Department of Justice, this appointment signals a transition to a counterterrorism approach with more emphasis on a legal framework. While such a transition is necessary in a post-2014 environment, it should not portend a complete restoration of the reactive counterterrorism strategies of the pre-9/11 era. The number and complexity of terrorist threats today would likely quickly overwhelm a reactionary posture based solely on a law enforcement approach. The CTC should continue to evolve and incorporate legal guidelines while continuing to implement a proactive strategy. A cyclical process that includes evidence as well as intelligence ensures a continuously better understanding of the threat, allowing the CTC to identify and prevent attacks.

In the same way the CT Cycle disrupted AQI, the CTC must evolve to optimize their efforts against AQAA worldwide. The CTC must continue to disrupt AQAA through direct measures and look to create opportunities to erode the attraction of their ideology. The community has not leveraged the necessary indirect efforts towards ideology erosion with the same purpose and clear strategic focus as it has with direct efforts against the AQ organization. During this research one senior official commented, "Who

is in charge of countering the AQ narrative?” The opportunities have and will present themselves. For example, AQIM mis-stepped in Mali alienating some of the tribes and there are reports of al-Nusra orchestrating suicide bombing efforts in Syria that randomly kill civilians. Similar to the mistakes made by AQI leader Zarqawi in Iraq, al-Shabaab attempted to install their strict form of Islamic Law and blocked western aid from reaching the areas stricken by famine.⁶⁵ This decision eroded their support from within. These types of mistakes were part of the downfall of AQI. These counter narrative opportunities can and need to be embraced and exploited by the CTC. The CTC already took the first step with the presidentially mandated creation of the Center for Counterterrorism Strategic Communications (CSCC). Led by the Department of State it also consists of a steering committee with members from across the interagency including the DoD, DHS, CIA, and FBI with the charter to counter the AQ narrative. The head of the CSCC Ambassador Alberto Fernandez recently stated his biggest concern is that “the enemy is not closing up shop and going home while we (U.S) continue to look inward the challenge (AQ) is changing.”⁶⁶ These long term indirect efforts are the true critical weakness of AQAA that must be exploited to turn disruption into defeat.

4) DE-CENTRALIZE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES. At the highest levels of the government, the decision-making process should be as decentralized as possible. This requires information management to ensure all threats become understood and addressed. While the CTC has refined this process and made improvements, almost all of the senior counterterrorism officials interviewed for this paper were frustrated with the amount of time one incident alone had dominated their schedules, particularly when they fully realized the numerous other areas that required their attention as well.⁶⁷

Technological advances have both helped and hindered in this area. There was particular concern over “missed opportunities” to eliminate threats due to the slow decision-making process.⁶⁸ The current centralized process is not optimal to handle the sheer volume of decisions necessary for effective counterterrorism operations. Most senior counterterrorism officials interviewed felt a campaign plan or refined operational strategy would enable the decentralization and delegation of decisions and ultimately a more effective approach to CT. This type of process and strategy requires some assumption of political risk but ensures “missed opportunities” are limited as much as possible. In order to lower the political risk associated with decentralized execution the USG must explain to the American public and international community why it is taking these steps outside combat zones.

The evolution of process also applies to the national decision making procedure. The decision-making process at the national level is not designed to handle the sheer volume of decisions required for a decentralized network to optimally operate. There is not enough “bandwidth”⁶⁹ for senior level principals to absorb the vast amounts of information and intricacies of every complex scenario. Centralizing these decisions paralyzes the network as this hierarchical process takes time to weigh the second and third order effects of every option. Most senior counterterrorism officials interviewed felt there was a glaring need for a campaign plan or strategy between the National Counterterrorism Strategy and deliberating over individual kinetic operations. An operational level strategy would enable decisions to be made at levels below the President. This type of strategy again incurs political risk but will decrease missed opportunities to counter threats.

5) REINFORCE A NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS. Perhaps the most challenging evolution to maintain in the future is the sustainment of the counterterrorism network that evolved over the last decade. The relationships built upon shared purpose and trust are the backbone of this informal network. Nearly every counterterrorism success both inside and outside combat zones could be traced back to the power of this network. Every senior official interviewed corroborated this fact by listing relationships as the key ingredient to any success over the last decade plus.

Built upon “handshakes” rather than formal contracts, the future of these relationships is tenuous at best. As the combat zones end, most officials were concerned that these relationships could suffer without a clear, shared purpose. Competition for dwindling resources and competing priorities will increase the difficulties. While most experienced counterterrorism senior officials and practitioners felt confident they could maintain their own relationships, they voiced concerns with the younger, “new” generation at the low to mid-levels of the CTC. The reduction in the need for an expeditionary mindset would add to the challenges as shared experiences that helped forge bonds decrease. Leaders at all levels need to establish trust between different organizations that may not have the same priorities or concerns.

In order to maintain this network, upward mobility within the CTC should require experience in multiple organizations. Mandatory training events that incorporate all organizations within the community may also be a potential method to sustain the network. Finally, employees from across the CTC should be encouraged to deploy

forward as often as possible to begin building the sense of trust and shared purpose that is critical to sustaining an effective counterterrorism network.

Figure (2) Optimized CT Cycle



One counter-argument to these recommendations is that the CTC efforts have decimated AQAA and they no longer present a viable threat. Almost all of the original core members of AQ have died or are now prisoners. The U.S. cannot economically or politically afford to continue proactive counterterrorism measures. The Pakistani military chief recently told former CJCS Admiral Mullen “After hundreds of drone strikes, how

could the U.S. possibly still be working its way through a 'top 20' list?"⁷⁰ U.S. actions have created more terrorists; the United States should let regional powers address the problem of AQAA.

However, the CTC's successful efforts against AQAA illustrate how a proactive strategy, with proper investments and understanding can optimize a process (CT Cycle) to dismantle a network. This also requires a network built upon the culture of shared purpose and trust to become optimized. Bob Woodward highlighted the devastating effects this strategy has had against AQI.⁷¹ CT operatives have applied the model successfully against al-Shabaab in Somalia and AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). NCTC Director Matthew Olsen testified that proactive measures of the Kenyan and Ethiopian forces are responsible for al-Shabaab inability to conduct transnational attacks.⁷² In January, 2013, Ambassador Mike Sheehan, emphasized the importance of keeping the pressure on AQAA on all fronts and highlighted the lack of successful attacks against the U.S. homeland stating, "It's more than luck ... we've put them (AQAA) under pressure around the world, because it's more difficult for them to train and deploy operatives, they make more mistakes."⁷³ This proactive counterterrorism strategy is imperative to protecting U.S. interests and creating opportunities for the indirect measures aimed at eroding AQAA's ideology and appeal and moving the strategy from disruption to defeat. Inherent in this strategy is the assumption of risk. Only with a comprehensive strategy that is clear to the American people can the CTC optimize efforts and defeat rather than just disrupt AQAA.

To maintain the momentum garnered over the last decade, policymakers must adapt and optimize the five elements of the CT Cycle in order to optimize U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Partial acceptance of these elements will result in episodic disruption of threats against the homeland, but the threat from AQAA and other terrorist groups will remain. Full optimization of the CT Cycle will defeat terrorist networks and protect the United States.

Endnotes

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the “CT Community” is defined as those organizations typically involved in CT activities. These include, but are not limited to, the National Counterterrorism Center, Central Intelligence Agency, Department of Defense (including the Special Operations Command, Defense Intelligence Agency, Joint Special Operations Command, and others), Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Treasury, and other organizations as necessary.

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